

Seaman's Bethel
West side of Johnny Cake Hill
(formerly Bethel Street)
New Bedford
Bristol County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-680

HABS
MASS,
3-NEBED,
14-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

SEAMAN'S BETHEL

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Address: West side of Johnny Cake Hill (formerly Bethel Street), New Bedford, Bristol County, Massachusetts

Present Owner: New Bedford Port Society, New Bedford, Massachusetts

Present Occupant: Owner

Present Use: Church

Brief Statement of Significance: A waterfront chapel linked sentimentally with the whaling industry and Herman Melville's novel, Moby Dick.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Built for the New Bedford Port Society; still in their possession /A. Downing abstracts, p. 9/.
2. Date of erection: 1832 /ibid./.
3. Notes on alterations and additions: "Rebuilt in 1867, at which time the front was redesigned and the tower added, and in the interior the seating plan reversed." /ibid./ A fictitious pulpit shaped like the prow of a ship was installed.
4. Sources of information: Antoinette F. Downing, Report on the Historical and Architectural Merit of the Buildings in or near the Area between Union and William-Hamilton Streets and Acushnet Avenue and the Waterfront in New Bedford, Massachusetts (New Bedford: City Planning Department, 1961), p. 9.

Manuscripts and drawings for the original building and the 1867 alterations are in the Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A meeting house rather picturesquely located in the old waterfront area of New Bedford, largely altered.
2. Condition of fabric: Sound structurally and well maintained.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Approximately 43' wide and 56' long. The front is toward the east. Two stories.
2. Foundations: Relatively thin granite laid like field stone, mostly stuccoed.
3. Wall construction: Wood frame, the front covered with lapped siding and the other walls with wood shingles, all painted.
4. Tower: Square, with corners cut off, half projecting from the front of the building. There is one stage above the roof of the building. The entrance is at grade level, with a large window above it.
5. Windows: Double hung wood sash, six lights over six lights. One twelve lights over twelve lights sash in west gable. Front windows have wood label mouldings.
6. Roof: Gable roof, now covered with asphalt composition shingles. A box cornice with mouldings is treated as a pediment on the east front; on the west end the moulding return at the corners, with the upper part extending along the rake of the gable.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Lower Floor: Entry in base of tower, vestibule, leading to a small auditorium; auxiliary rooms. Upper or main floor: Stairways lead up from vestibule at each end; the auditorium, with galleries along north and south sides, takes up most of the area. An office is in the tower, adjoining the former chancel.
2. Trim: Marks on the wooden wainscoting indicate the position of the benches before the direction of the seating was reversed.

- D. Site: This chapel occupies the top of a slight rise, and looms up in a picturesque manner in the old waterfront area. It faces east, toward the harbor, but the view in that direction is now cut off by the Whaling Museum. The site is rather restricted.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
National Park Service
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